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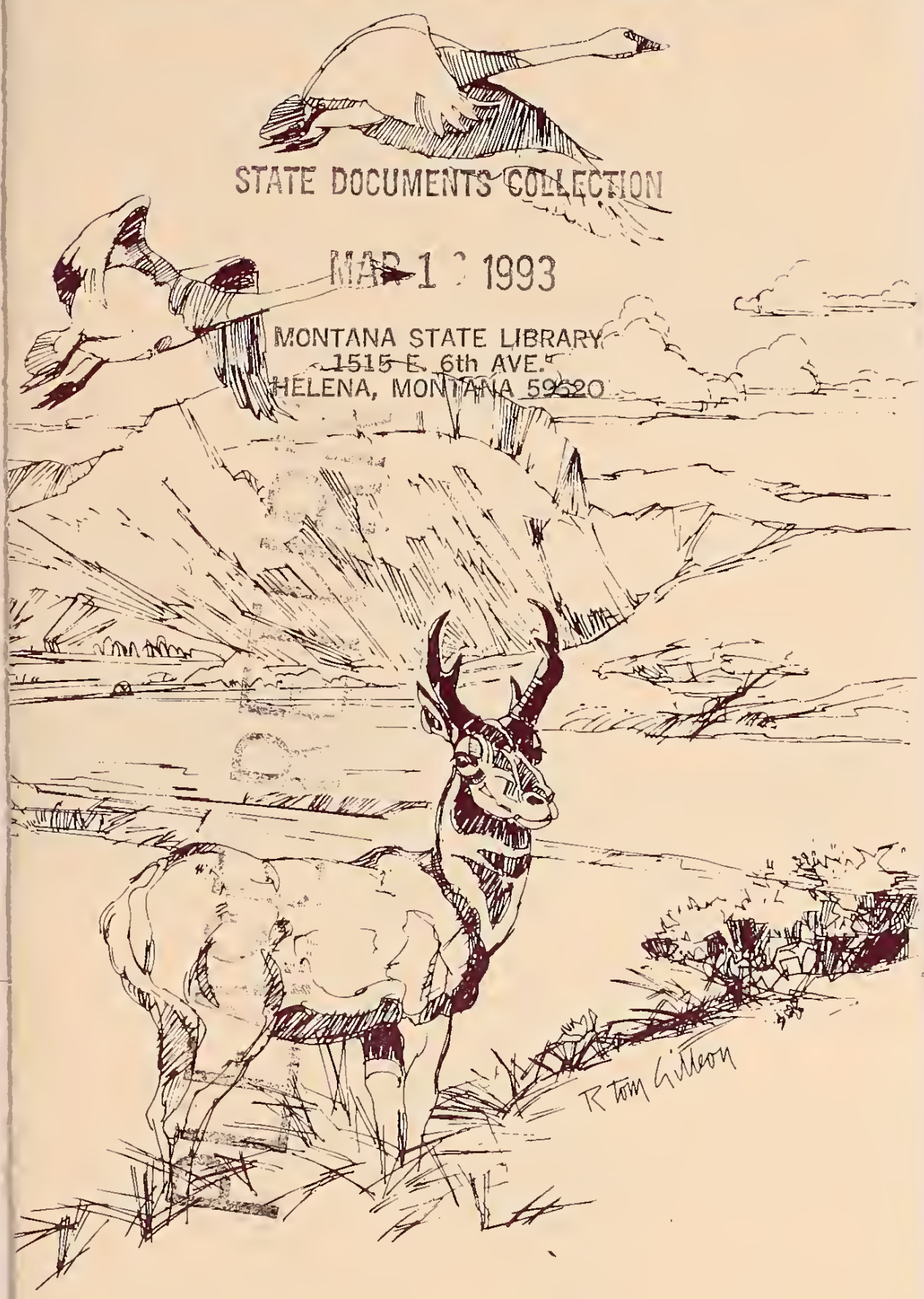
WILDLIFE VIEWING ON THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN FRONT



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FIVE AREAS FEATURED IN THE
MONTANA WILDLIFE VIEWING GUIDE

Wildlife at the Edge of Time

Experiencing the wildlife drama on the Rocky Mountain Front takes more than seeing. Feel the winds that sculpt the limber pines and ruffle the fur of grizzly bears. Listen for the musical whistles of hundreds of thousands of migrating snow geese. Taste the rain that transforms the short-grass prairie from gold to green for a few weeks each spring. Walk the Old North Trail where more than a century ago the Blackfeet trailed bison herds so immense that the earth trembled with their passing.

Past and present mingle freely here. It took two million years for the Sun River to carve the canyon home of today's bighorn sheep herds. Lizards bask on the bones of dinosaurs lining dry foothills that once were tropical swamps. Alpine dwellers, like pikas, marmots and mountain goats, spend their lives among limestone boulders older than rocks found at lower elevations.

A great break-up of the earth's crust 50 miles or more to the west started the mountain-forming commotion 70 million years ago. Giant limestone slabs slid eastward on beds of shale or mudstone until halting along a north-south line that would become the Rocky Mountain Front. It took dozens of ice ages in the last 2-3 million years for the glaciers to chisel the peaks and canyons.

In recent history, tipi rings trace the journeys of native peoples. Homesteads tell the story of settlement and the end of the great wildlife era. A series of designated wildlife winter ranges tell another story, of the efforts to find a place for both wildlife and people to coexist.

The sweep of mountains to plains cradles hundreds of wildlife species, including some that have vanished from most parts of the world, like the wolverine, wolf and peregrine falcon. This is the last place where the threatened grizzly bear still roams the prairie, descending from the greatest chunk of wildlands remaining in the lower 48 states.

Visit the wildlife viewing areas surrounding Choteau. Discover the stories of animals, birds and plants living at the edge of time.

Magnet for Migrating Birds

Freezout Lake Wildlife Management Area

A shimmering white cloud of birds descends on Freezout Lake. The calls of thousands of snow geese break the prairie stillness of a brisk March afternoon. They have flown 1,000 miles from Northern California in less than 24 hours, cruising 50 mph at an altitude of 2,000 to 5,000 feet. Within a week, they will rise from the lake in a synchrony of wings to continue their trek to breeding grounds in the Canadian arctic tundra.

The best time to witness northbound snow geese is mid-March to early April, and southbound from late October to early November. The series of natural and artificial lakes and marshes that compose Freezout Lake provide a critical stop-over for as many as one million waterfowl during peak migration, including tundra swans, pintail ducks, and teal.

Not all birds move on. In addition to viewing broods of ducks and Canada geese in summer, look for breeding shorebirds, such as the elegant avocet and black-necked stilt. Yellow-headed blackbirds and marsh wrens trill from perches on cattails. Black-crowned night herons peer from behind a curtain of green rushes.

Viewing seasons: March-November ***Size:*** 12,000 acres. ***Year established:*** 1953 ***Notes:*** Waterfowl hunting season is October-December. A map of the dike roads and a bird list are available at the headquarters, located at the east end. ***For More Information:*** Montana Dept.of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Freezout Lake, (406) 467-2646 or Great Falls (406)454-3441.

Haven for Rare Species

Pine Butte Swamp Preserve

Hidden in the willows that line the streams filtering through a vast swamp (or fen), a grizzly bear feasts on ants and dandelions. After a long winter hibernating in the nearby peaks, the bear feeds undisturbed here. The swamp nourishes other rare species, such as the yellow lady's slipper and an asexual hybrid minnow.

Like a giant thumb protruding from the peaks, the Pine Butte Swamp Preserve extends downward from Ear Mountain, taking in limber pine forests, foothills prairie and the swamp. Golden eagles hunt for jackrabbits. Warblers and flycatchers nest in dense shrubs surrounding beaver ponds. The faulted layers of earth also reveal startling reminders of ancient wildlife. The preserve includes Egg Mountain, where the Maiasaura dinosaur once nested.

For a grand wildlife viewing vista, follow the signs to the information board, park and take a short hike up a marked trail overlooking Pine Butte. Hiking areas are limited in other parts of the preserve to protect bears.

Viewing Seasons: March-November ***Size:*** 18,000 acres ***Year Established:*** 1978 ***Notes:*** Each summer, the Pine Butte Educational Outreach Program offers natural and cultural history courses and field trips for children, 7-18. The Old Bellview School on the preserve serves as an outdoor education center. Pine Butte Guest Ranch offers overnight lodging and tours of the preserve. ***For More Information:*** Montana Nature Conservancy, preserve manager, (406) 466-5526.

Living the High Life

Our Lake

A glacier lily droops between furry paws. A marmot surveys the meadow from its perch on a sun-warmed boulder. Flower and marmot share a tenuous existence in the alpine basin of Our Lake. Seasons are short, winters bitter.

Survival strategies are neat and effective. Mountain goats leap nimbly along sheer cliff faces. Their hooves act like suction cups. Marmots hibernate. Pikas cut grasses to dry and store for their winter burrows. Rosy finches and white-crowned sparrows hop across snow banks gleaning insects. Pocket gophers burrow underground, recyling minerals, distributing seed and aerating the thin soil.

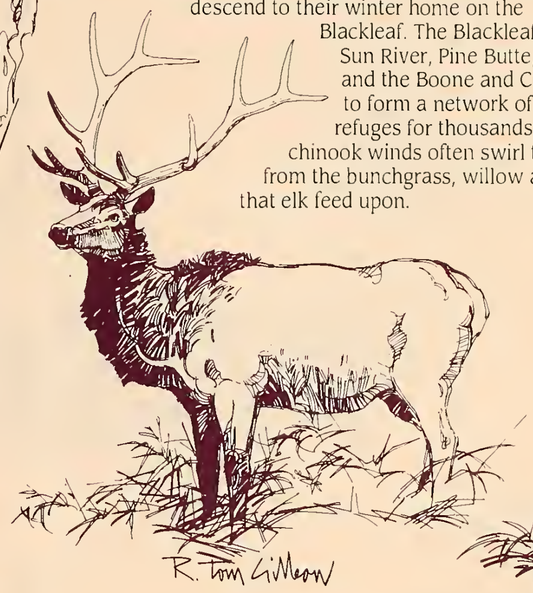
Each inhabitant at Our Lake is linked to the other. Please respect the delicate balance here by staying on the 3-1/2-mile-long trail. Listen quietly for the whistle of a pika or the twittering of swifts flying high above you.

Viewing Seasons: July-August ***Size:*** 700 Acres ***Notes:*** A three-panel display 50 yards up from the trailhead interprets the natural history of Our Lake. A main trail into the Bob Marshall Wilderness departs from the same trailhead and zigzags up to Headquarters Pass, spectacular bighorn sheep country. ***For More Information***: Forest Service, (406) 466-5341.

Elbow Room for Elk

Blackleaf Wildlife Management Area

Each winter when the snow deepens in the high country, about 150 elk descend to their winter home on the Blackleaf. The Blackleaf joins the Sun River, Pine Butte, Ear Mountain and the Boone and Crockett Ranch to form a network of snowfree refuges for thousands of elk. Here, chinook winds often swirl the snow from the bunchgrass, willow and aspen that elk feed upon.



At the turn of the century, only 300 elk lived along the entire Front. Elk and other wildlife had suffered greatly from the advance of settlers in the 1880s. Some, like the bison, would never recover. The turnaround for elk started in 1912 when an alarmed Montana Legislature drew the borders for the Sun River Game Preserve. More such preserves followed over the next several decades. Ensuring that elk have room to graze and find shelter on the Front continues to be a cooperative success story.

Look for prairie falcons veering in the winds. Listen for the eerie cry of the curlew. Witness a great herd of elk threading through miles of grasses that billow like waves in the wind.

Viewing Seasons: Year round (with some restrictions in winter) ***Size:*** 10,000 acres ***Year Established:*** 1979 ***Notes:*** The Blackleaf Road forms the northern boundary of the Wildlife Management Area and ends at the high-walled Blackleaf Canyon that encloses mountain goats and golden eagles. To reach the heart of the Blackleaf, take a marked dirt road off the main road that meanders toward Antelope Reservoir and Butte. If you are visiting between Dec. 1-May 15, vehicle travel is prohibited within the borders to protect wildlife during stressful winter months. From May 15 to July 1, the road to Antelope Reservoir is open to foot traffic only. ***For More Information:*** Montana Dept. of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, (406) 278-7754 or (406) 454-3441.

Clash of Horns

Sun River Canyon

If you could speed up the faulting and shifting of giant slabs of rock that created the Rocky Mountain Front, what would it sound like? In Sun River Canyon, you can hear a jarring crash, not of rock, but of horns colliding. Each November, bighorn sheep rams from one of the largest herds in the country gather within Sun River Canyon to test their mating prowess. Again and again, two males with massive curled horns hurl themselves at each other. Rams may clash this way for 40 times or more if evenly matched. The winner earns the right to lead the herd and mate with the ewes.

For most of the year, bighorns lead a more placid life munching grass in the canyon bottoms in the winter and crisscrossing distant cliffs in the summer. Sun River Canyon in summer resounds with other sounds — the slap of a beaver tail on water, warbles of songbirds among streamside cottonwoods and the drumming of woodpeckers.

Viewing Seasons: Year-round ***Size:*** 4,000 acres ***Notes:*** Look for a bighorn sheepviewing area with an accompanying interpretive sign. Sun River Canyon offers hiking, picnicking and camping. On the way to the canyon, you will pass the Sun River Wildlife Management Area. Stop at a signed pullout and scan for elk and deer herds in winter. ***For More Information:*** Forest Service, (406) 466-5341.

Respecting Wildlife Comes First

Observing and photographing wildlife is a rapidly growing vocation that usually causes little disturbance as long as people give wildlife room to live.

- ***Observe animals from a safe distance.*** *Use binoculars, spotting scopes and telephoto lenses. You are too close if the animals are looking at you with heads up and ears pointed toward you. If birds fly low over your head, you are probably too near a nest. If you see these signs, carefully move away until the behavior changes.*

- ***Move slowly and casually, not directly at wildlife.*** *Allow wildlife to keep you in view; don't surprise them.*

- ***Remember in grizzly bear country to be alert and aware of your surroundings.*** *Look for bear signs, such as paw prints, droppings, fresh diggings and rocks turned over. Avoid surprising bears.*

- ***Please leave pets at home.*** *Pets hinder wildlife watching and may kill or injure them.*

- ***Respect private property;*** *always ask permission to use private land.*

Wildlife Viewing Highlights

Wildlife Viewing Area (Species / Best Time to View)	SONGBIRDS (spring, summer)	SNOW GEESE (spring, fall)	TUNDRA SWAN (spring, fall)	WHITE PELICAN (spring, summer)	SANDHILL CRANE (spring, summer)	GOLDEN EAGLE (all year)	BALD EAGLE (fall, winter)	SHARP-TAILED GROUSE (all year)	LONG-BILLED CURLEW (spring, summer)	ELK (spring, fall, winter)	MULE DEER (all year)	WHITE-TAILED DEER (all year)	PRONGHORN ANTELOPE (spring, summer, fall)	MOUNTAIN GOAT (summer)	BIGHORN SHEEP (fall, winter)	COYOTE (all year)	GRIZZLY BEAR (spring, summer, fall)	MARMOT (spring, summer)	BEAVER (all year)	TROUT (summer)	BUTTERFLIES (summer)	WILDFLOWERS (spring, summer)
PINE BUTTE SWAMP PRESERVE																						
Prairie	●					●	●	●	●	●	●		●			●	●	●			●	●
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SUN RIVER CANYON																						
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BLACKLEAF WMA																						
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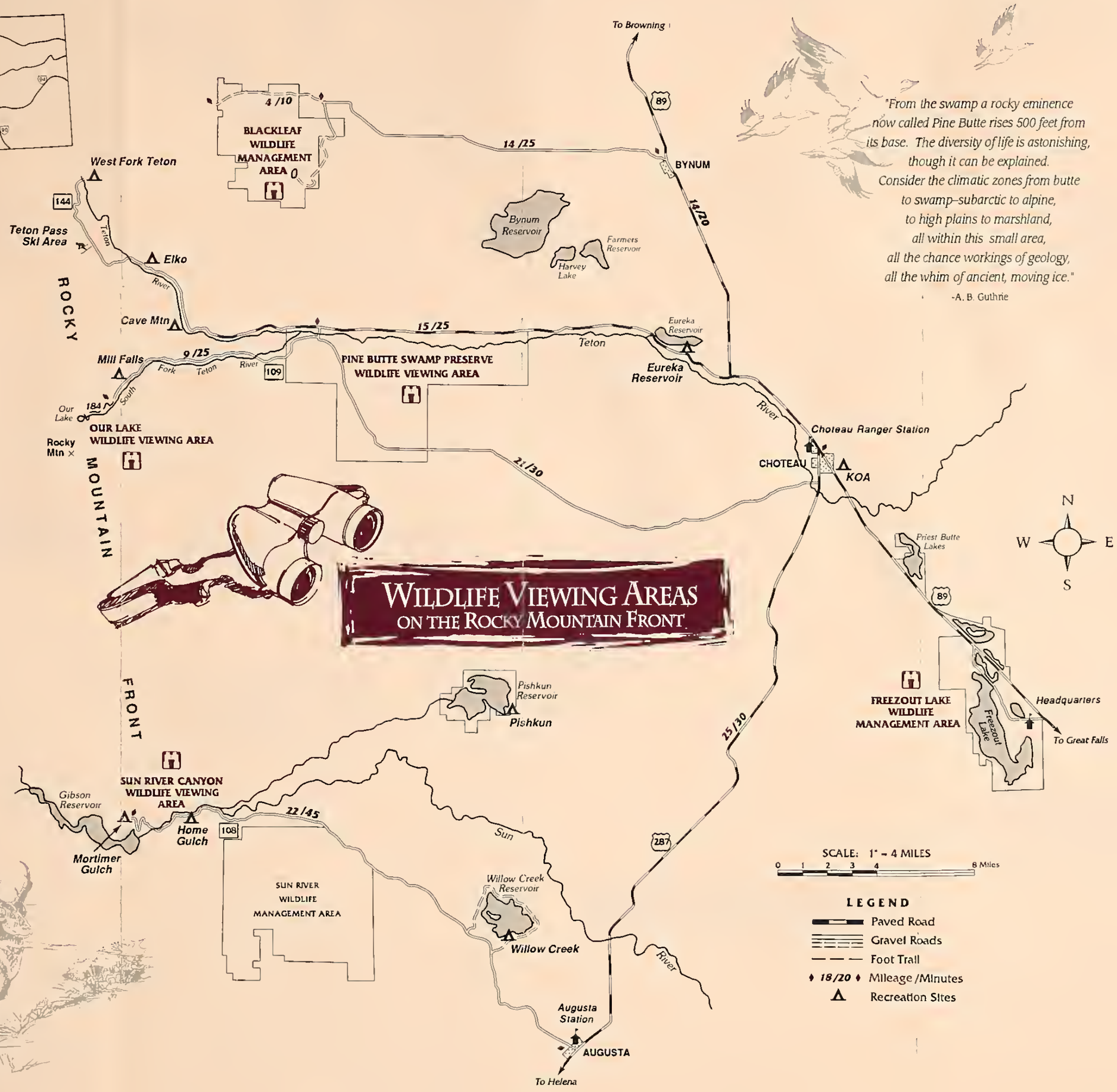
Choteau/Augusta Area Campgrounds

Camping Area	Season	Camp Sites	Facilities
HOME GULCH	5/25–11/15	Tent & Trailer	Toilets, Fireplaces, Drinking Water, Tables
MORTIMER GULCH	5/25–9/15	Tent & Trailer	Toilets, Fireplaces, Drinking Water, Tables
CAVE MOUNTAIN	6/1–11/15	Tent & Trailer	Toilets, Fireplaces, Drinking Water, Tables
MILL FALLS	6/1–9/15	Tent & Trailer	Toilets, Fireplaces, Drinking Water, Tables
WILLOW CREEK (MDFWP)	Yearlong	Tent & Trailer	Tables
EUREKA RESERVOIR (MDFWP)	Yearlong	Tent & Trailer	Toilets, Tables
ELKO	6/1–11/15	Tent & Trailer	Toilets, Fireplaces, Tables,
WEST FORK	6/1–11/15	Tents Only	Toilets, Fireplaces, Drinking Water, Tables
PISHKUN	Yearlong	Tent & Trailer	Toilets, Tables



"From the swamp a rocky eminence now called Pine Butte rises 500 feet from its base. The diversity of life is astonishing, though it can be explained. Consider the climatic zones from butte to swamp–subarctic to alpine, to high plains to marshland, all within this small area, all the chance workings of geology, all the whim of ancient, moving ice."

-A. B. Guthrie

"Away from the voices of cities,
away from the whine of tires
and the throaty explosions of engines,
the silence has a song to sing.
Hear? Hear it?"

-A. B. Guthrie

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